

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 3, 2020

His Excellency Ilham Aliyev
President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
Presidential Palace
Istiqlaliyyat Street 19
Baku, AZ 1066

Dear Mr. President:

The United States and Azerbaijan share an interest in addressing regional security threats and ensuring European energy independence from Russia. The United States would also like to encourage foreign investment in Azerbaijan's economy to foster diversification and growth.

Unfortunately, persistent concerns regarding judicial independence and respect for fundamental freedoms in Azerbaijan damage international confidence in the integrity of Azerbaijan's institutions and the security of investments in the country. We are deeply troubled by serious and ongoing violations of press freedom in Azerbaijan, in particular, the rights of Azerbaijani investigative journalist, Khadija Ismayilova.

As you know, your government forced the closure of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Baku bureau in 2014 and prosecuted Khadija in connection with her reporting for the news outlet. An Azerbaijani court conditionally released Khadija in 2016 following her conviction and imprisonment on dubious tax evasion charges. Since her release, Khadija remains on probation and is prohibited from traveling internationally. Khadija's inability to move freely has prevented her from accepting job opportunities and visiting her ailing mother before she passed away. Over the course of a years-long campaign of harassment and intimidation, she has also been victim to gross privacy violations that have never been adequately investigated, including the discovery of concealed cameras in her apartment.

More than five years since Khadija's arrest and the closure of RFE/RL's Baku bureau, journalists continue to be silenced and nearly all online and independent media have been blocked. In addition, there are no independent print or television media remaining in the country. Even Azeri journalists who cover Azerbaijan from outside the country are subject to harassment related to their work. We urge you to cease such harassment and allow independent media to once again operate inside Azerbaijan.

It is our hope that your government will work to establish an open space for the media in keeping with Azerbaijan's international commitments as a member of the Council of Europe and

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. We also urge you to immediately lift all restrictions on Ms. Ismayilova.

As members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, we will continue to monitor Azerbaijan's progress on press freedom and the ability of Khadija to travel internationally.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Rubio', written over a horizontal line.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ben Cardin', written over a horizontal line.

Benjamin L. Cardin
U.S. Senator